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Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
Governor's Bill 5044: AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2017.	Concerned about 5.75% cut and budget format.

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 120 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various sustainable forestry, State Park and Forest, trail recreation, and land conservation issues.

I am testifying today to express CFPA's concerns about two primary elements in the proposed 2017 Mid-term adjustments: 1) the 5.75% across-the-board cut that departments would have to absorb, and 2) the new budget structure that lumps individual program line-items into the category of "Agency Operations." Although the across-the-board cut will certainly impact the Department of Agriculture, CT Ag Experiment Station, and other divisions within CT DEEP, I will focus my remarks on the budgets for the State Park division and for CEQ.

While we have concerns about what is in these proposed mid-term adjustments, we may be more concerned about what is not in them. Support from the Administration has not been forthcoming for several creative ideas that have been proposed in the General Assembly to actually raise funds to support the State Parks. For example, just this past year there were proposals for a fee on plastic bags, a voluntary contribution on vehicle license registration, and a proposal to enable CT DEEP to utilize cabin rentals and other fees to support State Park operations. Any one of these proposals, if enacted into law, would make a big difference, and are worthy of your support. Do we have to resort to bake sales and car washes for the State Parks?

You may not know that approximately \$6 million dollars every year is raised directly through parking/admissions fees and camping fees that visitors pay to the Parks. However, since 2009, this funding has not supported the operations and maintenance of the Parks, but instead goes directly into the General Fund. Connecticut pays some of the highest admissions fees in the region, and it is a travesty that these funds do not support the Parks directly.

A few years ago, an increase in State Park fees was proposed, and we heard from many angry supporters of the State Parks who said, "I wouldn't mind paying a higher fee if I knew that it was supporting the Parks." CT DEEP cannot continue to try to do more with less, and the State Parks are literally at a breaking point with insufficient staff and flagging morale despite strong leadership from Commissioner Klee. So, we look to you to have the will and good sense to establish a new, secure source of funding for State Parks operations and maintenance once and for all.

There are some fundamental questions that the midterm adjustments raised for us:

1. How will the 5.75% cut be distributed across program areas? It must be frustrating for Legislators to not see this level of detail, and it certainly is disconcerting for the many advocates who care about conservation programs to not know whether they will be funded or at what level. I should note that we have great faith in Commissioner Klee to make the best decisions amidst limited resources, but we are concerned about the precedent and how this might big rolled-up Agency Operations structure could potentially be abused by future Commissioners. We are also concerned about the specific cut of \$270,000 to the Soil & Water Conservation Districts which do valuable conservation work across the state.

2. How can this across-the-board cut not impact the provision of services to the public or hurt agency morale? Staff at CT DEEP are already at historically low numbers and their responsibilities continue to increase. A cut will likely result in further attrition as veteran staff leave the Department and their positions are not refilled. This ongoing attrition will hurt both services for the public and agency morale.

3. How will the shift of fringe benefits and other expenses from the Comptroller's office into CT DEEP's budget affect the Department over time? It seems that as the cost of these fringe benefits and other expenses rise in the future, and if budgets continue to be squeezed, that will serve to deepen the impact of cuts every year.

Even small cuts can be troubling for a small Department. Take the case of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The CEQ budget only has two line items, Personal Services (\$182,657) and Other Expenses (\$1,789). A cut of 5.75% to the CEQ budget is a cut of \$10,573. CEQ does not have the ability to find some slack in their "Other Expenses" budget. That means that the arbitrary across-the-board cut directly impacts the only two staff who make CEQ function. This is a big problem, perhaps unintentional, that I hope this Committee will address.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I am glad to respond to any questions you may have.